

The left still lacks a megaphone.

# False Dawn

BY JASON ZENGERLE

**T**HREE YEARS AND three days after their husbands were killed in the September 11 terrorist attacks, five women came to the National Press Club to make an announcement. The widows—Kristen Breitweiser, Patty Casazza, Monica Gabrielle, Mindy Kleinberg, and Lorie Van Auken—were no strangers to Washington news conferences. They had relentlessly lobbied Congress and the White House for a commission to investigate the terrorist attacks, and, once that commission was created, they hounded its members, making certain they asked the questions September 11 families wanted answered. In the process, the women—known as the “Jersey Girls,” since four hail from the Garden State—became media stars and political powers. Katie Couric and Diane Sawyer sat with them for interviews, and 9/11 Commission Co-Chairman Tom Kean credited them with making the Commission’s final report possible.

Which is why what the five women had to say last month in Washington, D.C., seemed momentous. Although none had ever been involved in partisan politics, and some had voted for George W. Bush in 2000, the Jersey Girls announced that they were endorsing John Kerry. Their reasons for doing so mostly had to do with Bush. “On September 11 ... President Bush failed to protect my husband,” Casazza declared. Van Auken added, “This administration took their eye off the ball. They let Al Qaeda go. They let Osama bin Laden go.” Finally, Breitweiser explained her endorsement in the most basic terms. “I am here because I am scared,” she said. “I know John Kerry as president will make this nation safer than it is today.”

The Jersey Girls, it seemed, were positioned to serve as the liberal analogue to the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (sbvt). Like the Vietnam veterans who criticized Kerry’s war record and his antiwar activities—and turned the presidential race on its head this summer—the September 11 widows were passionate and had compelling personal stories. And, like sbvt, which managed to make one of Kerry’s greatest political assets into a liability, the Jersey Girls were undermining Bush on the very issue on which he’d staked his reelection: keeping Americans safe.

But then, strangely, no one paid any attention to the Jersey Girls. After the press conference announcing their endorsement of Kerry, only CNN and CNBC had the women on for interviews; the next day, a mere dozen newspapers carried articles about their entry into the campaign. The Jersey Girls had to fight to stay in the public eye. They attended Kerry’s major speech on Iraq at New York University a few

days after their press conference, and Breitweiser traveled to Miami to attend the first presidential debate (no small matter, considering she had not set foot on an airplane since before September 11). But none of it seemed to matter. The media seldom reported their remarks; when Breitweiser trooped around spin alley after the first presidential debate—standing underneath a sign reading KRISTEN BREITWEISER, 9/11 WIDOW—she was largely ignored.

Today, six weeks after their announcement, the Jersey Girls are virtual nonentities—their few interviews mostly coming with liberal talk-radio hosts. “They were all over the media and had no problem getting access to the media before they endorsed John Kerry,” says David Brock, the former right-wing journalist who now runs the liberal media watchdog Media Matters. “But, subsequent to their endorsement, they’ve hardly been seen or heard. It’s odd.”

And telling. The Jersey Girls’ inability to insert themselves into the race is just one example of a greater problem that continues to bedevil the left: its difficulty battling opponents outside the formal confines of campaigns. This is nothing new. Ever since the rise of the conservative counter-establishment out of the ashes of Barry Goldwater’s failed candidacy, the right has had at its disposal a constellation of think tanks and media organs to supplement campaigns—a constellation the left lacked. But this presidential campaign was supposed to be different: Liberals had set out to duplicate the right’s counter-establishment. In the past two years, they founded a Heritage Foundation–like think tank, the Center for American Progress, that would come up with liberal policy ideas and make sure people articulating those ideas got on television and radio. They started two liberal talk-radio efforts, Air America and Democracy Radio, and a slew of liberal blogs. And they took advantage of a loophole in campaign finance reform law to create or bolster independent political groups—including MoveOn and the Media Fund—that would run advertisements attacking Bush. Although these groups would all be technically independent of the Democratic candidate’s campaign, they would nonetheless work with him to take back the White House. “Hillary Clinton talked about the vast right-wing conspiracy,” one prominent Democrat said last year. “Well, this is going to be the vast left-wing conspiracy.”

All of these groups had different goals and methods. Assessed individually, many can plausibly argue that they achieved them. Taken together, however, these independent efforts were supposed to amount to something more: the kind of megaphone that can force issues into the public sphere. But, as this presidential race has shown, that megaphone is still mostly silent.

**O**NE REASON THE liberal effort didn’t gel in this campaign is obvious: It’s still in its infancy. “It took the other side thirty years to build up their incredible machinery of ideas and communications,” says John Podesta, who heads the Center for American Progress. “It wasn’t until President Bush concentrated

everyone's attention that we really got serious about building a counterpart." As with any new venture, it takes time to build an infrastructure, and liberals still lack pieces like a network of like-minded media outlets.

To understand how such an echo chamber works, it's instructive to look at SBVT. The vets, a previously unknown group, were able to leverage a \$500,000 ad buy in three states into a race-shifting national story.

The right-wing echo chamber—most significantly, Fox News Channel, conservative talk radio, and the *Drudge Report*—played a crucial role. Working with the conservative political consulting firm Creative Response Concepts, the swift boat vets made sure their allegations received heavy airing in the conservative media. In late July, prepublication excerpts from SBVT Co-Founder John O'Neill's book about Kerry, *Unfit for Command*, ran exclusively on the *Drudge Report* and in *Human Events*, a conservative magazine that shares an owner with the book's publisher, Regnery. In early August, the day before the vets unveiled their first ad, the group gave a sneak peak to Sean Hannity, who aired it on Fox News Channel. The swift boat vets also briefed conservative talking heads, including Bill Kristol, Fred Barnes, Rich Lowry, and Tony Blankley, so they would be prepared to spread the gospel on chat shows.

By the time the ad made its debut, the conservative media was primed, and the group's allegations against Kerry spread like wildfire through it. *The New York Post* and *The Washington Times* gave the charges prominent play ("MEDAL MUDDLE—VETS SAY KERRY WAS A FRAUD," read the *Post*). Conservative talk-radio hosts did more than 500 interviews with SBVT. And Fox—whether it was Hannity or Brit Hume or Bill O'Reilly—kept up a steady drumbeat about the story. Thanks to the conservative echo chamber, the SBVT charges didn't disappear, and eventually the mainstream media—much of which was initially reluctant to cover the group's charges—could no longer ignore them. First, CNN and MSNBC went with the story. Then, the network news broadcasts and *The New York Times* followed suit with intense coverage. "It got to the point where the volume around the story was so loud," explains Creative Response Concepts President Greg Mueller, "in the way it was being echoed through *Drudge*, and talk radio, and *The New York Post*, and *The Washington Times*, and Fox News, and then CNN and MSNBC, that *The New York Times* and everybody had to start doing stories."

It was precisely this sort of echo chamber the Jersey Girls lacked. As the mainstream media initially ignored the SBVT attack against Kerry, it also initially ignored the Jersey Girls' endorsement of Kerry; it was just one of the countless campaign events that inevitably get lost in the shuffle. But, unlike the vets, the Jersey Girls couldn't force the mainstream media to eventually pay attention. There was no 24-hour cable network to recycle their accusations; no ideologically simpatico newspapers to run headlines like "BUSH KILLED MY HUSBAND—9/11 WIDOW CHARGES"; and the liberal talk-radio shows on which the women appeared don't yet

reach many listeners. Not even the fact that the Kerry campaign openly embraced the Jersey Girls—something the Bush campaign never did for the swift boat vets—could keep their story alive.

And it isn't just the Jersey Girls who have been hamstrung. A liberal political action committee called RealVoices.org cut TV advertisements of family members of soldiers killed in Iraq speaking directly to President Bush. Its first ad, which was unveiled at a press conference in Washington in late September, featured Cindy Sheehan, a 47-year-old former youth minister whose son Casey, an Army mechanic, was killed in Iraq. "I imagined it would hurt if one of my kids was killed, but I never thought it would hurt this bad," a crying Sheehan says in the ad. "When you haven't been honest with us, when you and your advisers rushed us into this war. How do you think we felt when we heard the Senate report that said there was no link between Iraq and 9/11?" But, although the audio of Sheehan's ad received heavy (free) play on Air America, and MoveOn paid to have it aired on television in several battleground states, Sheehan has been unable to generate much positive free media. "I'm disappointed with the coverage we've gotten so far. I thought that the coverage didn't begin to capture the importance of the story," says RealVoices.org's founder, Deane Little.

"The disadvantage is in how you deliver your message," says Brock. "Rush [Limbaugh] reads their material on the air regularly. That's fifteen million people hearing that. I do go on Al Franken's show [on Air America] for half an hour every Wednesday, and [the nationally syndicated liberal talk-radio host] Ed Schultz's show for an hour every other Friday, but the reach isn't the same."

Even Michael Moore has suffered for the lack of a left-wing echo chamber. While *Fahrenheit 9/11* received plenty of media attention, liberal columnists and talking heads were just as likely to attack Moore's movie for bending the truth as they were to celebrate it. "When the swift boat ads came out, the right-wing and conservative columnists all jumped on the bandwagon and wrote from the same talking points. When *Fahrenheit 9/11* came along, you had various liberal op-ed writers who felt they needed to be objective," says Democratic strategist Chris Lehane, who consulted for Moore. "Our side tends to hold intellectual honesty up as an important factor."

**B**UT, EVEN IF liberals had an echo chamber, the efforts at a left-wing conspiracy would have had other problems. As this presidential race has amply demonstrated, for independent efforts to work, they need help from the campaign.

Although laws prohibit direct coordination between campaigns and most independent groups, explicit coordination wasn't necessary for conservative groups to bolster the Bush campaign's message. "The Republicans stepped back and decided to paint John Kerry as a flip-flopper," says one Democratic strategist. "Every single day, they got up with a

plan to do that. When Bush himself and the Bush campaign every single day says that John Kerry is a flip-flopper, it doesn't take a great deal of expertise to realize that's the message and to craft your ads accordingly." The strategist continues, "There's been nothing like that from the Democratic side and the Kerry campaign. No one woke up in the spring and said, 'This campaign's going to be about X; every single day we're going to talk about George Bush and X.'"

Another Democratic strategist who worked on independent efforts has the same complaint. "The natural and correct inclination of outside independent groups is to follow the lead of the campaign. . . . And that's been virtually impossible. I think everybody involved in outside groups has been involved in meetings and conference calls in which people just threw up their hands and screamed about the lack of an identifiable coherent message from the Kerry campaign."

Indeed, the most notable thing about the left's independent political efforts is how muddled they've been. Unlike conservatives, who recognized the negative frame Bush sought to hang around Kerry and repeated that message, liberal groups have tried numerous different approaches. MoveOn ran hysterical attacks that branded Bush as a liar and a menace; the Media Fund, meanwhile, ran ads that were more straightforward attacks on Bush for sending jobs overseas. But, in recent weeks, the Media Fund began running ads that hit Bush for his ties to the Saudi royal family. "That particular line of argumentation became a lot more natural and appealing because the campaign has almost entirely shifted to foreign and military policy," says the Media Fund's Jim Jordan. Of course, the Media Fund probably thought of that months ago but couldn't run the ads because the Kerry campaign was studiously avoiding foreign policy at the time.

And the Kerry campaign's incoherence—and reluctance, until recently, to bash Bush's character—also had a chilling effect on independent efforts. Not long after the swift boat ads came out, one Democratic strategist tried to organize an independent 527 around the Jersey Girls. The strategist envisioned an ad in which the widows would ask Bush why he has yet to capture Osama bin Laden. But, when the strategist went to donors to raise money for the spots, he discovered few had the stomach. "If you're a Bush supporter and you're giving millions to the swift boat vets, you know no one in the Republican Party is going to be mad at you," says the strategist. "But, if you're a Democrat and you have a party and a nominee complaining all the time about these negative attacks, you might not want to be associated with negative attacks, even if they're against the other guy." The group was never formed, and the ad was never produced.

**K**ERRY'S IMPROVED PERFORMANCE since the first debate has soothed some liberals' nerves, and many are already taking a philosophical approach to assessing this campaign—whatever its outcome. "It's young," Brock says of the left's attempts to

duplicate the right's machinery of communications and ideas. "I don't think people can expect some of these extremely young institutions and efforts are going to be having the full impact of their potential in the matter of just a few months." Like a number of liberals, he believes that, as these institutions grow and the left gets more accustomed to how these independent efforts work, the vast left-wing conspiracy, so to speak, will come together. Groups like the Center for American Progress and MoveOn will become more sophisticated; liberal talk radio will grow. Indeed, some Democrats even whisper that a Bush victory could be the best thing to happen to the liberal echo chamber, since it would energize the left.

But other liberals are less sanguine. They say that improvements in infrastructure will mean nothing unless the left gets more comfortable making negative attacks and smarter about how it makes them. "If you look at a lot of the stuff that circulates on the left-wing blogs and with MoveOn about how Bush is a liar, it doesn't move anybody," says one liberal strategist. "Conservatives are very good about slowing down and thinking about not what will make them feel good to say, but what charge will be most credible with voters."

Either way, there does seem to be one surefire way to measure whether the vast left-wing conspiracy has come together. "If we're sitting here four years from now and talking about why we don't have our own swift boat ad," says the strategist, "then we'll know we still haven't figured it out." ■

---

How the election affects the Court.

# Supreme Mistake

BY JEFFREY ROSEN

**W**HETHER OR NOT the Supreme Court decides the presidential election, the election will decide the future of the Supreme Court. And the first vacancy, which could come sooner rather than later, as Chief Justice William Rehnquist's surgery last week reminds us, is likely to provoke a partisan explosion that will make the battle over Robert Bork look like child's play. As Election Day approaches, liberal and conservative interest groups are trying to rally their bases with the same alarmist slogans they

© 2004 The New Republic. All rights reserved. Copyright of New Republic is the property of TNR II, LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.